



“50 YEARS OF PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY”

The Courier

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With A Grain of Salt

by Bob Kanehl

Growing up in the Manchester, I developed a healthy pride in the town, and my schools. Remarkable Manchester personalities, innovations and incidents filtered through the years, nourishing this pride and I carried it with me as I lived in other states and other towns.

Relating Manchester history to these other places, I discovered the advantages we took for granted living here.

One of these stings of pride filled me one summer evening as I stood in the rose garden of Dearing Oaks Park in Portland, Maine. The large park is located north of Portland's Congress Street District, and the Old Port. It has served the city well over the years, providing a respite and entertaining gathering place for the residents. Its charm was even captured in the poem “My Lost Youth,” written in the 1800s by Portland's own Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

So it was with great pride that I found among the identified species of roses, the First Lady rose. This rose was developed by the Burr Nursery right here in Manchester. Charles Burr and his son also named Charles, created the nursery just north of the Apol Opera House on Oakland Street. For years the company was famous for its bushes and ornamental trees. Burr filled orders from around the world.

The elder Burr was interested in horticulture and focused on native and landscaping plants. The young Burr was drawn to the cultivating of flowers and in particular roses. The one I discovered in Portland's garden a few years ago was developed in honor of two presidents' wives.

It just goes to highlight that Manchester has a rich history that affected more people than just its residents.

Another moment when the pride of my hometown

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Society Acquires Historic Silk Vault Building

by Dave Smith

The Manchester Historical Society has this month purchased the silk vault building located on Elm Street Extension, about 150 feet to the north of the History Center building. This unusual, one-of-a-kind structure was built in 1920 in response to an attempted silk robbery which resulted in the death of William Madden, a member of the Cheney Brothers security force. The adjacent building to the north was also built at the same time and was able to securely house a full-size railroad box car.

The vault building was constructed in the side of a hill, next to the tracks of the South Manchester Railroad. The structure consists of three stories, the upper stories accessible only via an internal, hydraulic elevator, which is powered by water. Each level contains 6 individual vaults, protected by heavy steel doors. There are no windows in the substantial brick walls. Cheney Brothers used the vaults to hold incoming raw silk as well as finished silk goods waiting for shipment by rail to distant markets.

The Society will use some of the vaults for storing items which take up valuable space in the History Center and our other properties. Other vaults are rented to individuals or businesses.



Three level vault building on Elm St. Extension



Drop Us A Line...

You can contact Society President
Jack Prior at
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*A newsletter of the
Manchester Historical Society*

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We Will Miss

Carl Eckblom, along with his wife Linda, was a long time member of the Society. He worked for Standard Washer and Mat Co. in Manchester beginning in 1979 and later became the owner of the company. Standard Washer and Mat is one of the oldest companies in Manchester which is still in business. Carl loved to travel and camp and his hobbies included woodworking.

Burton "Burt" Hicock volunteered at the Society for many years along with his wife "Bea." Together they often served as docents at our museums. Among other passions, Burt was a fisherman, golfer and whittler.

Vivian Ferguson

Community activist, historian, justice of the peace, radio host, and realtor Vivian Firato Ferguson, born in Manchester in 1925, passed away on December 10, 2017. She was a founding member of the Manchester Historical Society, and served as an officer and board member for many years. Vivian served on and was chairperson of the town's Cheney Brothers National Historical Landmark District Commission for many years, and worked to establish and protect the District. She served on the town's Board of Directors, worked at Hamilton Standard, Hartford Steam Boiler, Cheney Brothers, and as a columnist and cook book editor at the family-owned newspaper, The Manchester Evening Herald. Vivian and her husband, the late Tom Ferguson, had three children; the family lived for many years in a historic mansion on the Great Lawn – the Horace Bushnell Cheney house – where they entertained and got to meet members of the Cheney family who previously lived in the house.

Vivian will be remembered as a gracious, vivacious, outgoing, and generous lady, always willing to mentor people in local politics and preservation. She was a gifted story teller, and loved travel and meeting new people. The Historical Society and her many friends in the Society and in the community will miss her.

*Vivian, Tom and their 3 children,
at their home on the Great Lawn*



New Officers Appointed by Board

With the resignations of Kris Miller as Secretary and Dennis Gleeson as Treasurer, and the position of Vice-President vacant, the Board of Directors at the November board meeting elected three new officers to fill those positions until the next meeting of the membership scheduled for the spring.

Ed Firestone was elected Vice-President, Ann Lucente was elected Secretary and Dave Smith was elected Treasurer.

To Our Readers

If there is something you would like us to write about, please contact Dave at 860-647-9742 or at info@manchesterhistory.org.

Grain of Salt

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overcame me was while I was teaching in Norway, Maine. While reviewing the history book used for the student's understanding of American history I discovered an image I had seen too many times to count.

There in the Civil War chapter was a reproduction of a painted portrait of Dorothea Dix. For those not familiar with American Civil War history Ms. Dix was the head of the Union Army's nursing corps. After the war she became an advocate for the mentally insane. She was a native of Maine. Dixville is named for her family, and so it was natural for this painting to be in a text book used in that state.



*Dorothea Dix by
Seth Cheney*

What the book selecting committee did not know, was that the artist of the painting was from my hometown, Seth Cheney. A similar reproduction of the portrait is actually located in William Buckley's History of Manchester [A New England Pattern](#). I had seen it over and over throughout the years I had read the book from the time it was printed in 1973.

I just could not believe that I would see that same picture in isolated Norway, Maine. My students soon had a second Manchester Civil War connection in their history class, the story of Christopher Spencer and his repeating rifle. The rifle used so effectively at the battle of Gettysburg that General Custer's outnumbered Michigan Brigade outshot JEB Stuart's army.

A final connection to the town that stands out in my mind was the glass bottle display at Old Sturbridge Village. The students I took to that living museum had to hear how I grew up just down the road from the ruins of the factory. Today you can still walk past the same structure I did, a vacant stone walled hint of the prosperity of early Manchester.

As they say – it is a small world and we are all connected. What other Manchester connections are there out in the rest of the nation?



*David Bauman reading
"A Christmas Carol"*

Homestead News

by Peter Millett

The Homestead was again busy and alive with activity this fall, and it was satisfying to see young families enjoying themselves. A special thanks to Jamie Donohue, always in beautiful, period costume helping out; Susan Stoppelman, our Hartford Artisans Weaving Center volunteer introducing visitors to the loom at every event; and Vivian Carlson and Jennifer Bussa for adding color and life with their historical interpretations in costume. Thanks also to Susan Barlow for effectively getting the word out to the community. John Hovey and his grandson Andrew are deserving of special recognition for how beautiful the grounds look. That is entirely the work of their own hands, and was enjoyed by all.

At the Homestead Harvest in October we celebrated the success of the History Garden with an old-time music duet, hayrides, activities for kids and a two-man (kid) log sawing contest. We honored the American Indians at the Native American Legacy and Harvest. Kids sorted our heritage beans and hand-ground Indian flour corn that we grew. We kept this event small this year, but we are partnering with MCC contacts and others to develop a program to truly honor the life and contributions of the Native Americans of Manchester.

Two December events wonderfully capped a fun year at the Cheney Homestead. The Holiday Open House welcomed over 150 visitors who enjoyed the beautifully inspired decorations provided by the Manchester Garden Club. With the Hartford Artisan Weavers, we installed and dedicated a special loom (with a fascinating history of its own) for rag rug weaving, and honored the craftsman who refinished it. Above this we have placed the newly acquired Russell Cheney painting of the Homestead. We also enjoyed hosting the history and art clubs from MCC at this event.

The decorations were left up for the week and on Sunday, December 10th we finished our season with an intimate fireside reading of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." It was expertly read by David Bauman for an audience of 25. With the decorated and lighted Christmas tree, pomander making (cloves and oranges), and the newly fallen snow all about the Homestead, it seemed this important story took on its original feel.

Cheney Brothers 180th Anniversary

Next year will mark the 180th anniversary of the founding of the Mount Nebo Silk Manufacturing Co., predecessor of Cheney Brothers Silk Co. Prior to the establishment of the silk company, several of the Cheney brothers tried raising silk worms and established several nurseries for growing mulberry trees. Here is an interesting recount of their early efforts as described in the Manchester Evening Herald in 1923.

“ATTEMPT TO RAISE SILKWORMS HERE TURNED OUT A FAILURE

First Nursery Established Here in 1834 – Industry Boomed for Four Years Before Crash Came

A fruitless and disastrous attempt to cultivate silk in this country was made coincident with the beginning with the manufacture of silk, the object being to produce the raw material here instead of sending abroad for it. An essential food for silk worms was the morus multicaulis, better known as the mulberry leaf. The Cheney brothers sank a fortune in efforts to produce their own raw silk. Their first nursery was established in South Manchester. An item of the time shows that morus multicaulis trees, the [rice of which in 1834 was only about \$4 a hundred, rose in 1835 to \$10, and in the beginning of 1836 to \$30 a hundred at the nurseries.

A Norwegian bark arriving in the April, 1836, had started from Marseilles with 70,000 of these Chinese mulberry trees, but on the way all perished except some 15,000, which were consigned to Cheney Brothers. It was added that this was the last shipment which could be received until autumn.

The possibilities of the venture were shown by the fact that on May 12th, Ward Cheney had laid 300 trees horizontally, six inches deep in the ground, from which 3,700 shoots had sprung up. The leaves from these, as early as June 25th, he had commenced feeding to some 6,000 silkworms, which produced three bushels of cocoons. By August 1st, the shoots were 2 ½ feet high. With such a multiplication of trees and such quick production of silk, it is no wonder that the boom spread like wildfire.

In November, 1836, the Cheney's leased, for \$400 per year, 117 acres at Burlington, New Jersey. They established here a nursery and cocoonery and later another near Cincinnati, Ohio.

It is an interesting detail that the trip from New York to Philadelphia at this time required from 10 A.M. to 5:30 P.M. and was made via a steamer from New York to South Ambrose, a train to Bordentown, and another steamboat to Philadelphia.

In October, 1837, the Cheney's had sold about \$14,000 worth of trees from Burlington, N.J., and had about 50,000 on hand. The trees at this time brought about \$30 a hundred. Silkworm eggs were \$5.50 an ounce.

Most of those who got in early, got big returns at first. A Monmouth, N.J., man had made a clean profit of \$3,000 from a \$400 investment in the trees. With the multiplication of such instances of results, the rage for

the multicaulis spread all over the country and the price mounted still higher.

In January, 1839, trees brought from a dollar to two dollars apiece, and in isolated cases soon reached as high as \$300 and even \$500 a hundred.

But all of this speculation had been going on in spite of the panic of 1837. During 1839 the hard times, which had already affected other fields, spread to the nurserymen and silk culture. At almost the same instant came the realization that the morus multicaulis was not hardy enough to be raised without difficulty in the North, and that even if it could be, Americans would not take the trouble and pains necessary to the successful culture of silkworms.

By 1840 the crash was complete. The silk growers had wasted their money. The nurserymen were left with great quantities of the trees on hand, which had cost them heavily and were now worth next to nothing. Importers could not even pay the freight on their shipments from abroad. The trees were sold for such humble uses as pea brush, or unceremoniously uprooted and burned. Practically everyone in the business bore his share of the loss.

This shock to silk culture was followed by another disaster, which was unavoidable, and an ever-present risk of the silk producer.

Blight Fatal To Industry

In 1844 a fatal blight affected almost all of the mulberry trees in the country. This caused the loss of all the multitudes of silkworms, and practically drove the growers out of business. Even at Mansfield, Conn., where it had been most prosperous, the culture was finally abandoned.

Although several other attempts have been made to revive the production of raw silk in the United States, none of them has been sufficiently successful to make a repetition advisable. The fundamental reason for this is, not that mulberry trees and silkworms cannot, though with difficulty, be raised in this country, but that the production of raw silk is essentially a household and hand process, still requiring, as in the days of ancient China, infinite patience and an altogether disproportionate amount of human labor. Even in Italy, during the silkworm season, the whole house, including the bedrooms and beds, is given over to the worms, upon which the women lavish every attention from daylight until late at night, - and for all this trouble and work, they net only six or seven cents a day. In Japan and China such household labor may bring as low as two or three cents a day.”

-Manchester Evening Herald, October 4, 1923

Calendar of Events

- ▶ **The Old Manchester Museum** at 126 Cedar Street, open by appointment -- phone 860-647-9983. The research facility is available all year round -- to make an appointment, please phone 860-647-9742.
- ▶ **The History Center and museum store** are generally open weekdays from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., 175 Pine Street at the corner of Forest Street -- where you can purchase local history items such as books, copies of vintage maps, Manchester Herald cookbooks, t-shirts with historic scenes of Manchester, old high school yearbooks, vintage business directories, mugs, notecards, and limited-edition ceramic tree ornaments with images of Cheney Homestead and other landmarks. There is also a study area where visitors can conduct research by browsing through old Manchester directories, surveys, high school yearbooks, and booklets. There is an exhibit of the Russell barber shop, with barber pole, and vintage barbering tools and furniture, as well as a standing exhibit about Cheney silks. Please check to make sure the building is open before coming! 860-647-9983.

"The Mystique of Silk" exhibit at the History Center, open during regular hours, weekdays from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., Created by Carol Cheney, great-granddaughter of Knight Dexter Cheney, she describes the exhibit as commemorating "the 100th anniversary of the Cheney Cemetery Association in 2016, and the enduring Cheney Family legacy of innovation and good will. The family expresses deep gratitude to the generations of Cheney Brothers employees whose dedicated service helped build the Town of Manchester." Much can be learned about the Cheney Brothers brand from their advertisements in high-end magazines of the day. These ads emphasized life style and corporate image over product details.

Sunday, December 10 from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m., Open House at the Cheney Homestead, 106 Hartford Road. Special program to be announced. View the 1785 house, and hear commentary about the residence. Guided tours include history of the building and its contents, and of the family who lived there. As with many New England homesteads, the house is built into a hill, with doors opening out to the yard on both the upper and lower level. The Keeney Schoolhouse is on the grounds of the Homestead, and is open when the weather is warm enough.

Monday, January 1, 2018 at 1:00 p.m. History Walk featuring the "Great Lawn" starting at the Cheney Homestead, 106 Hartford Road. Park at Fuss & O'Neill, 146 Hartford Road, Manchester. This one-and-a-quarter-hour walk will proceed along streets and lawn to view historic mansions, schools, and a church, with a visit to the nine acres purchased by the Town in 2005 for open space and historic preservation. Historical Society members Tom Ferguson and Susan Barlow will comment on the historic landscape and buildings. There is some steep and uneven ground, so participants should wear sturdy shoes or boots. Extreme weather cancels, but the walk will be held in light rain or snow flurries, so please bring an umbrella. \$10 for non-members, \$7 for members, and free for children under age 16.

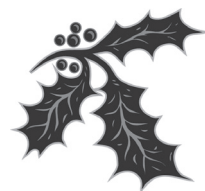
Sunday, January 9 from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m., Open House at the Cheney Homestead, 106 Hartford Road. Special program to be announced.

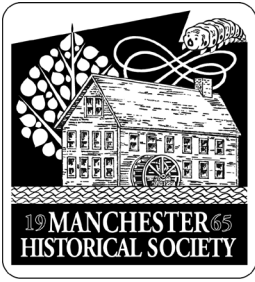
Old Time Film Showings, at the History Center. Watch for announcements about the upcoming Old Time Movie Nights. Classic films from the past will be shown beginning in a few months. They will be suitable for family viewing and will include comedy films as well as mystery and dramatic films.

The movies will be held at the History Center and popcorn and refreshments will be served. Stay tuned.

Christmas Shopping at the Museum

The museum stores at the History Center and at the Old Manchester Museum are great places to shop for a unique gift reflecting our town's heritage, or for that person who might be difficult to shop. The books on local history, the ornaments created each year showing a local landmark, copies of old maps, a range of Manchester High School yearbooks, t-shirts, and many other items are available at reasonable prices.





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